



**Middle
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May 7, 2013

Dr. Maher Musbah
President, Suez University
Cairo-Suez Road
Suez
Arab Republic of Egypt
via fax: 20 62 366 9914

Dear President Musbah,

I write on behalf of the Committee on Academic Freedom of the Middle East Studies Association (MESA) of North America in strong protest of the current investigation and informal suspension without pay of Dr. Mona Prince by officials at your university. We believe that this investigation is unwarranted by the facts of the case and badly undermines the principles of academic freedom. We are troubled, in addition, by evidence that the mistreatment of Dr. Prince by the university is politically motivated.

MESA was founded in 1966 to promote scholarship and teaching on the Middle East and North Africa. The preeminent organization in the field, the Association publishes the *International Journal of Middle East Studies* and has nearly 3,000 members worldwide. MESA is committed to ensuring academic freedom and freedom of expression, both within the region and in connection with the study of the region in North America and elsewhere.

As has been widely reported in Egyptian print and broadcast media, Dr. Prince stands accused by one of her students of expressing untoward sentiments about Islam during a class discussion about the problem of sectarian tensions in Egypt. We use a vague formulation because the exact complaint against Dr. Prince seems to change every few days. Originally, she was told she would be investigated for “contempt of religion.” In an April 28 interview with *al-Youm al-Sabi’*, you indicated that this charge would be downgraded to “insulting Islam.” On May 3, an article in *al-Masry al-Youm* suggested that she faces allegations of “contempt of religion and insults to certain Salafist sheikhs.”

As might be guessed from the fuzzy nature of the charges, the precipitating incident appears to have been a simple misunderstanding by the student of Dr. Prince’s points or at most a disagreement between the two of them. Dr. Prince’s April 16 appearance on Mona al-Shazli’s television program, “Gumla Mufida,” was instructive in this respect. When the student called in to the program to voice her grievances, she could not offer any examples of wrongdoing on Dr. Prince’s part. It was clear that the student had been offended by certain turns of phrase in readings that Dr. Prince had assigned about sexual harassment in Egypt and by Dr. Prince’s opinions about sectarian discord in the country. But that was all.

It seems to us, indeed, that Dr. Prince acted precisely as a professor should, particularly in a discussion section of a course designed to teach critical thinking skills. She encouraged her students to tackle matters that, while sensitive and unpleasant, are among the most pressing socio-political issues in contemporary Egypt.

We understand that several of Dr. Prince’s students oppose the complaint against her but are too intimidated by the atmosphere on campus to speak out on her behalf.



We are quite disturbed, therefore, that the university has opened an investigation at all. The mere fact that the university deems this innocuous incident worthy of inquiry could exercise a chilling effect upon academic freedom. Must every professor worry that, if a student is displeased by what s/he teaches, s/he will be subjected to questioning by administrators and suspended from his job?

Other aspects of Dr. Prince's case are even more disconcerting. She has received death threats, as garbled versions of what transpired in her classroom have spread across campus and through the media. According to the Egyptian Initiative for Personal Rights and the Association for Freedom of Thought and Expression, university officials' first response to the student's accusations was to advise Dr. Prince not to come to campus because they could not guarantee her personal safety. Shortly afterward, according to press sources, Dr. Prince's department brought a fresh charge against her—which she denies—to the effect that she regularly skips her lectures. We are very skeptical of these allegations, given the timing. Finally, we are greatly concerned by Dr. Prince's statement that she was suspended for six months last year because she is “one of those Tahrir Square people.”

We urge you to drop the investigation of Dr. Prince immediately. We echo the words of our Egyptian colleagues who have been quoted in the press decrying the inquiry as a threat to academic freedom and freedom of expression in all of Egypt. We hope that you will welcome Dr. Prince back to her job at Suez University, recompense her back pay and take all necessary steps to protect her from anyone who would harm her. We appeal to you, finally, to affirm publicly that the principle of academic freedom will be upheld at Suez University in the future.

Sincerely,

A handwritten signature in black ink, which appears to read 'Peter Sluglett', is positioned above the typed name.

Peter Sluglett
MESA President
Visiting Research Professor, Middle East Institute, National University of Singapore

cc: Dr. Mustafa Mus'ad, Minister of Higher Education (*fax* 20 2 794 1005)